CHEAP TRUTH

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EDITORIAL. Call The Black Box at 300 baud, (512) 835-9742.

CHEAP TRUTH stalwart Sue Denim sharpens her lance and charges the windmill:

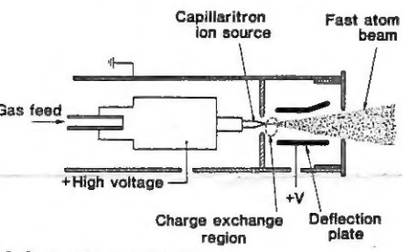
REAL SF FANS DON'T READ PRIEST

There's a saying: "Real programmers don't eat quiche... they eat Twinkies and Szechuan food." This kind of junk-food mentality is true of your typical SF fan, too. Your real SF fan doesn't read Priest. He doesn't read Dick or Ballard, either. He reads David Brin and Larry Niven and Anne McCaffrey. Junk food for the brain.

And what's more, he's proud of it. He holds his head high so the light will catch his coke-bottle glasses, hoists his basketball gut, and, with the odor of Twinkies on his breath, tells you, "I'm special. It takes a special kind of person to appreciate this stuff."

And the hell of it is, every so often something that really is special comes along in a junk-food wrapper. Like a granola bar, or maybe chicken cordon bleu on a bun -- it looks like junk food, tastes like junk food, but it's actually got real nutrition in it. This year we're lucky -- we've had a couple of rich, vitamin-packed granola bars already, and at least one of them is being scarfed down by junk-food addicts everywhere.

Certainly they like the taste of NEUROMANCER (by William Gibson, an Ace Special, $2.95 (Gollancz £ 8.95)). I mean, this is high-tech enough to satisfy the most acned sixteen-year-old hacker whose only sex life is getting his modem on-line with an X-rated bulletin board. Never mind that is shows you how the future may very well be, never mind the political issues, this guy knows what it's like to be plugged in, man.



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But that's okay. Literature, the really good stuff, has a way of changing your thinking whether you want it to or not.

But let's talk about our other granola bar for a minute. You see, the problem with this kind of literature is it's got a short shelf life. A book that comes out in September might as well have a little printed squib on the back that says "Best if enjoyed before November 1," like you see on bags of Twinkies, because in no time at all it's going to be gone.

You may already have trouble finding THE DIGGING LEVIATHAN (by James P. Blaylock, Ace, $2.95). You probably passed it by the first time because you weren't interested in some Edgar Rice Burroughs pastiche, or because it looked like a kid's book. I suppose it is a kid's book, at least in the sense that Jim, the main protag, is only 15 -- but then Daniel Pinkwater's LIZARD MUSIC is a kid's book, and you shouldn't miss that one either.

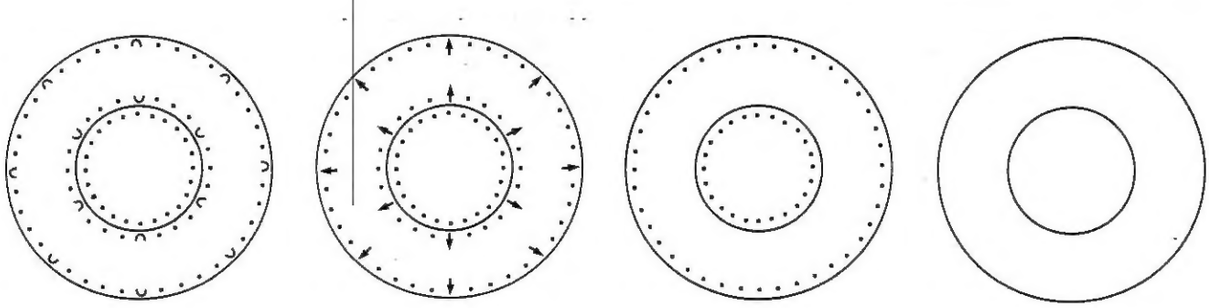
What makes this book special is its integrity. Blaylock refused to humiliate his characters for the sake of a cheap laugh, quite an achievement when those characters are a bunch of lunatic pseudo-scientists trying to get to Pellucidar. This isn't Burroughs' junk-food Pellucidar with the dinosaurs and all, though -- this is the 'real thing,' the hollow earth written about by countless other nutcases over the years.

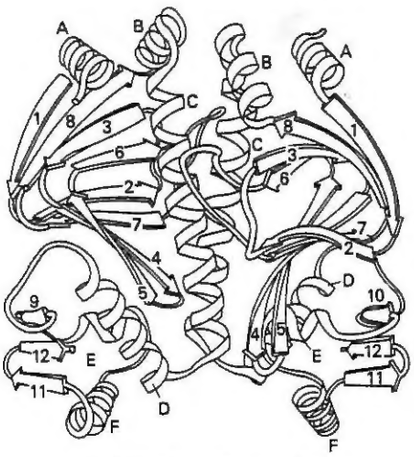
These people get so real that it's scary. We see them at their Newtonian Society meetings and in the backyard workshop where they are training mice to be amphibians. But we also see Jim's father William raging in paranoia at a neighbor's dog, even, in one of the book's most brilliant scenes, at a tube of toothpaste.

Blaylock's best trick, though, is the way he draws you in so deeply. When William looks in the mirror, the readers see their own faces.

When you finish this book, give it to somebody who likes Twinkies -- but don't tell them it's good for them. You don't want to scare them off.

CHEAP TRUTH, 809-C West 12th Street, Austin, Texas 78701. Vincent Omniaveritas, editing. Todd Refinery, graphics. NOT COPYRIGHTED. "Get Nineties!"





CLARKE: A SOCIAL STUDY

Arthur C. Clarke's latest book is 1984: SPRING, a nonfiction collection of essays, articles and speeches of varying consequentiality. Many are simply filler, the genial time-marking of a dean of letters. The flyleaf lists fifty-four other Clarke books, and anyone familiar with them will find that little has changed. Clarke's personal credo was set many decades ago.

Some critics have been less than kind to Clarke and his thinking. "A two-dementional space-jockey rationalist, a libration away from mysticism" was Bob Black's memorable phrase. But Clarke's millenial scientism peculiarly fits the spirit of the age. And if the dizzy 1980's fit Clarke as well, then it is partly his own doing. To a great extent he has created the brand of visionary technolatry that is our era's broadest streak of optimism.

His visions -- 'prophecies' is not too strong a word -- have been spread across the planet in twenty million books in thirty languages. The movie 2001, alone, set Clarchetypes into the backbrains of millions. Astronauts joined NASA because of Clarke's books. Cosmonauts read him. His influence on mass culture ranks with that of H. G. Wells, and has possibly surpassed it.

Clarke is a political and social activist. The originator of the communications satellite. The winner of the UNESCO Kalinga Prize. The Chancellor of Moratuwa University in his adopted home, Sri Lanka. The man behind the revolutionary suggestion that the United Nations create its own spy satellite system. (The instant rejection of this notion by both superpowers strikingly confirms its essential soundness.)

And then there is Clarke the media celebrity. Host of a television series. Consider the recent OMNI commercial, in which Clarke, on a deserted beach, presides over mystic door-frames opening on star-speckled cosmic vistas. This is his folk-mystique in its purest form: Clarke as pop icon, the horn-rimmed Gandalf of the spaceways.

Clarke might seem to be a multifaceted, divided man, but this is illusion. Clarke is whole; it is our culture that is divided.

More than any other SF writer, Clarke truly lives in the interzone between science and literature. His career has been a deliberate struggle to make this no-man's-land a place worth living and working in. And he has made both sides respect him on his own terms.

When all is said and done, the social role he has created may be his most important legacy. Few will ever fill it, for few have his gifts or intellectual stature. But those who do will find their way smoothed by the precedent he has set.

Clarke's success was no accident. He pursued fame quite deliberately, with a set ambition he has followed for years.

Clarke has always portrayed his decision to live in Sri Lanka as a dreamer's romantic gesture. But one wonders. It made him a large frog in a small pond, giving him a scope and influence he could never have had in a larger, industrial nation. It removed him from the centers of publishing, with their subtly destructive practicalities. It allowed him to pursue both his hobbies, and his muse, without distractions. And it erased his parochiality, giving him the global view that is one of his most attractive attributes.

Such hardheaded ambition may seem out of character for this gentle and donnish man. But the evidence is there. Consider THE SANDS OF MARS, written in 1957. It is utterly dated now -- all except for the role of its protagonist, Martin Gibson.

Gibson is an internationally famous British SF writer of an extrapolated 1990's. He has the sort of bestseller status and critical attention that must have seemed pure fantasy to Clarke's fellow SF scribes of the '50's. Gibson writes "novels of space travel" and popular science journalism. He begins as almost a figure of fun: fussy, overimaginative, constantly teased by arrogant know-it-all technicians. But as the book develops, Gibson's role becomes crucial: the role of the man in the middle, the irreplaceable interpreter, between powerful but mute scientists and an equally powerful but ignorant lay public.

The book ends with Gibson's mystic vision of his own future: political power, a role of leadership in a new world. "For the first time, Gibson knew what lay at the end of the road on which he had now set his feet. One day, perhaps, it would be his duty, and his privilege, to take over.... It might have been sheer self-deception, or it might have been the first consciousness of his own still hidden powers -- but whichever it was, he meant to know."

It was Clarke's autobiography -- in the extrapolative mode.

As an artist, Clarke may have little to teach the gifted hot-shots who are his successors. But those who chafe at the confines of our ghetto -- those who know that SF is more important to our world than it has ever been allowed to be -- have a lot to learn from the canny old Sage of Ceylon.